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GUNS, GANGS AND GREED:

Gaming's Hip Hop Diversity Gap

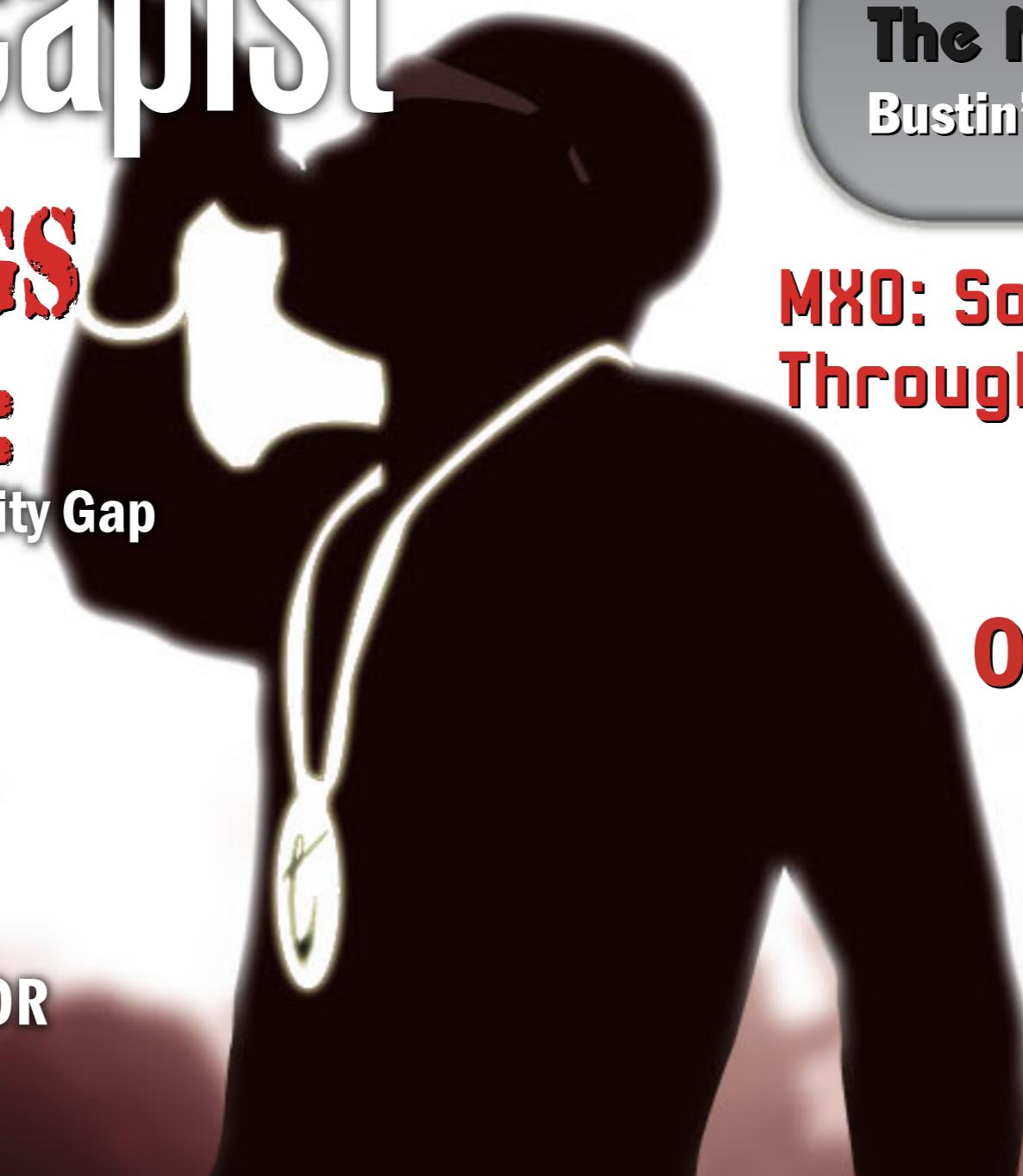
by Thomas Wilburn

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"Gamers Get Game' ... you know, there's actually a lot of cross-over between hip hop cultures and gamer cultures," I explained.

tumbleweeds

This was a common occurrence over the past few weeks in trying to put this issue together. I got several "Um, I don't really know anything about hip hop," and, "I don't see it."

So, let me explain.

Some trace the actual beginning back to the 1970s. As many movements do, it began in basements and schoolyards of young people looking for a new outlet. This was a chance for these people to make a mark on society, to express ideas in an entertaining and meaningful way. There were different parts to the equation - those who wrote the words, those who had the skill for presentation and those with the technical mastery to capture it all so it could be shared with others.

Over time, the movement spread. Copies of the creations were made and distributed to friends, who then caught onto the movement. Some of these made their own, some just enjoyed the products, looking for more.

To outsiders, it looked just like another fad produced by the youth, but it was more than that. A culture began to grow up around this movement. It developed its own set of slang and one could pick out enthusiasts by their clothes. But it was not only surface level. It had become a full-fledged social segment of the population, addressing political concerns, providing social commentary, and other times simply bringing entertainment to those who enjoyed it.

Of course, whenever a movement catches the mood of an entire segment of the population, the large budget companies will follow. The double-edged sword of large companies pushed the movement into the public eye, garnering media attention and retail distribution. But at the same time, this explosion onto the main stage took away some of the personal edge that made the movement important, with the hardcore feeling left behind.

I could be talking about hardcore gamers or hardcore rap, it really doesn't matter. Yes, to look at each from the outside, games and hip hop appear to be quite different. But, with histories and foundations so similar, can the present day of each movement really be so different?

This possible similarity, and the seeming convergence of the two, is what we set out to explore with this week's issue of *The Escapist*. Pat Miller speaks with the members of Superior Tek, a rap group whose members found each other through gaming. Feature author Thomas Wilburn looks at the lack of cultural diversity in gaming, both in the development studios and the games themselves, and some things being done to change this imbalance. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I enjoyed reading your gorgeous and well-written publication today and thought that Jason Smith did an objective assessment in his article about EA. The same cannot be said about the story about Origin, which only shows Origin's side of the story.

It is ludicrous to adopt the Garriots' views about me. First, I will let history speak for itself in dismissing any charges that I don't care about quality. This is especially true about all the award-winning games that I personally produced in that time period. Second, I never said the quote that is attributed to me about the legal dispute between EA and Origin. Yes, it is true that there was a dispute. Origin and EA had an exclusive distribution agreement and Origin violated it in a very big and costly way. The managers in charge of distribution for EA, Larry Probst and Randy Thier, decided to pursue the matter legally when other methods failed. I was not personally involved.

The result of this, sadly, was that Robert and Richard Garriott took it very personally as an insult to their integrity, and adopted the view that it was a personal vendetta from me. It was, in fact, only a contract issue that required resolution, and both sides were, in fact, using the tools at their disposal to pursue resolution. Nobody at EA intended to make any aspect of it personal, and in fact I was hardly involved and never read any of the paperwork.

The Garriots nonetheless decided to make me out to be the villain and the scapegoat for their troubles, while clinging to various false beliefs about what had happened. In the first place, they should have been able to keep things in perspective as a contract dispute in a business setting, and just played the game. And if they were going to have any actual heartburn about it they should have directed it at the guy who was doing it to them, Randy Thier (as Randy would no doubt attest). But the Garriots had personalized me as the company and obviously had feelings of competitive rivalry. It was emotionally convenient for them to want to believe they had done nothing wrong and that I

was the cause of all their problems. In all of this there is a tremendous amount of ego and self-righteousness that needs to be exposed.

For the record, the Garriots clung to their misperceptions for a period of years



until I was finally able to sit down with them and set the record straight. It was clear that they had so much pride that they had to believe they were infallible and had done nothing wrong, and therefore any business partners who disagreed regarding a contract surely must be the bad guys. But they nonetheless came to realize that I was not playing puppeteer and they calmed down and we remained very friendly in the many years since then. Richard even gave serious consideration to coming to work for me a few years ago.

This article comes as a bit of a surprise to me. Not the lead quote, because my success with EA did indeed unnerve many competitors who wanted to externalize blame for their problems. But disparaging my commitment to quality, putting words in my mouth, and saying they never would have sold the company if I had been involved - these inaccuracies paint a very wrong picture. The truth is that when Origin was sold to EA I was chairman of the board and the largest shareholder of EA. They sold their company more to me than to anyone. That was around the time we patched things up. I'm sorry to see these inaccuracies. I have a great deal of

respect for Robert and Richard and I would hope after all this time and maturing, we would all have the ability to see the truth in ourselves and in our histories.

-Trip Hawkins

PS: As a sidebar, a modest correction to the EA story is that I was very militant about establishing direct retail relationships and EA used no distributors whatsoever from 1982-1984. This was a very challenging plan but it succeeded and EA became profitable in 1984. Larry Probst joined the company shortly after that period. We increased our commitment to this strategy in early 1985 when Larry and I implemented a plan in which we phased out independent sales reps and instead expanded our own internal sales staff. Also, in 1985, I felt that we had enough strength in our retail relationships that we could blend in distributors on a limited basis on tighter margins. Despite board skepticism about my idea, Larry and I also successfully implemented that plan, while making sure that distributors did not take any direct accounts away from us.

To the Editor: You've done a great job so far building a magazine that captures the interest of mature gamers. Perhaps I speak only for myself (but I doubt it), but I do believe that those who are interested in the content and focus of *The Escapist* can handle a four letter word uttered by someone you're interviewing. It just feels like you're plugging my ears with kid gloves when you [deleted] with quotations. I promise you that at least one of your readers isn't going to be offended if you let quotes stand.

-Jerrod Hansen

To the Editor: I read "Code Union, Code Better" first with amusement, then with alarm, and then with rage and fury.

First, your comparison of the coal strike of 1902 to the plight of software developers today is ludicrous. Those men were facing death and grievous injury on the job every day; carpal tunnel, indigestion and sleepless nights just don't measure up. The mining of coal was in the national interest; producing the next version of *Madden* is frivolous.

You blithely refer to tenure as a "comfortable assurance;" what it does is remove any incentive for the employee to perform at anything above the absolute minimum. Short of opening fire in the workplace with a fully-automatic weapon, there's almost no way to fire a tenured employee. I don't know about you, but I don't want an industry that rewards the least effort.

Software developers are not the sort of uneducated, can't-get-another-job types that unions were originally intended to protect. A developer who was good enough to get a job at Electronic Arts in the first place should not have difficulty landing a gig with another development shop. People work at Electronic Arts because they **choose to**.

Unionization is the single most dangerous idea to ever be proposed in our industry. What do you think will happen when a union comes in and everyone's salary suddenly goes up? I'll tell you - layoffs. The very people your union is supposed to protect - the people at the bottom of the ladder - will be fired. The people who remain, having received tenure, will have no incentive to excel. I can't think of a better way to

hand over our dominance of the software industry to another country.

This is a very bad idea.

-Duane Roelands

To the Editor: I only found your magazine a couple of months ago, and I must say I'm generally of the opinion that it is excellent. Your recent series of articles on the games industry and independent game developers by Greg Costikyan was extremely helpful to me, since I've recently entered the realm of independent games developer.

By entered I don't mean I've released software. I, and a couple of fellow programmers, have begun the arduous process of building a game with no money. Oddly enough, I find the articles in the Escapist to be rather useful in helping me get my head around the current state of play in the games industry. The overall extremely high quality of the writing also goes some way to ensuring my appreciation of your work.

-Carey



GUNS, GANGS AND GREED:

Gaming's Hip Hop Diversity Gap

by Thomas Wilburn

In a marketing blitz becoming all too common, 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* movie will be preceded this November by its soundtrack and, of course, a video game. At some point that month, Sierra will release *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, a fictional story of guns and glory starring the rapper and his G-Unit soldiers. The game will also feature Eminem as the detective, and Dr. Dre as a "street-wise veteran." Meanwhile, Snoop Dogg will star in director John Singleton's *Fear and Respect*, a game that purports to realistically depict gang life in South Central.

Both games will join *Midnight Club: Dub Edition*, EA's Street series of spin-offs, and the *Def Jam* games as hip hop themed console offerings. Sports games now uniformly include a number of hip hop tracks as their background music; *Madden 2005* features Will.I.Am and Z-Trip, while *ESPN NBA 2K5* has more than 20 licensed songs from artists like Del the Funky Homosapien and The Roots. But other than a few celebrity vehicles and soundtrack choices, has hip hop really gotten past the surface of gaming?

The fact is, despite these few examples of influence, games are far whiter than any other American media. Keeping statistics on diversity by age, race and role in television acting, the Screen Actor's Guild credited little more than 15% of lead TV roles to African-Americans in 1993. That same year, the U.S. Census put the percentage of African-Americans in the population at around 13%. No doubt, there is still plenty of room for improvement in how television portrays people of color, but the gaming industry assigns an even more restrictive role.



According to this year's Metacritic top-rated 100 titles for PS2, only one game (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*) has an African-American lead protagonist. Needless to say, it is not exactly a well-rounded look at African-American culture (or of any culture, really).

It would be convenient to blame this diversity gap on a wider social prejudice, and be done with it. Again, I certainly won't argue that racism has been eradicated in other forms of entertainment. But perhaps there's something about the violent nature of video games themselves that makes it easier for them to follow a path more akin to blaxploitation than to Spike Lee. Certainly there's little equivalent to the family drama or comedy in video games, and only a small amount of middle ground between full-on violence and abstract puzzle solving.

Proceeding down the thousand or so games in the Metacritic ratings, most of them only have African-Americans as members of sports teams, a collection of fighters or secondary (often non-playable) characters. To be fair, most games that allow the player to create a custom avatar (such as the *Tony Hawk*

multitude) do offer a full range of ethnicities. Still, of those with black protagonists (my unscientific count found seven), four are adaptations of movies starring African-Americans (*Catwoman*, *Blade II*, *Men in Black II* and *Enter the Matrix*). One is an adaptation of a comic book (*Shadow Man 2*), which also had an African-American main character in its original source. The remaining two games are from the *Def Jam* series, which does present a somewhat more noteworthy cast including hip hop stars and black actors.

None of these titles are original intellectual property with African-Americans in lead roles, and most of them aren't good games. In short, the number of black main characters in gaming is virtually zero, and the roles that they're assigned when they do appear usually fall into the same stereotypical categorizations: athlete, criminal and/or rapper.

Why should we care about this scarcity of non-white leads in video games? Besides a simple sense of social justice, examine the demographics of the market in question. Phoenix Marketing International notes that African-



American gamers spend an average of \$48 per month on their hobby, \$18 more than whites. Furthermore, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, they're more dedicated: 8- to 18-year-old blacks play for about 20 minutes more each day than their white counterparts. To cap it all off, a 2004 Nielsen study confirmed to the marketing world that African-Americans and Hispanics are a lucrative, underserved market. One would think that there's money in those kinds of numbers - but apparently not enough to buy the spotlight.

Causes, Symptoms, and Caveats

Don't worry, I'm not going to scapegoat Rockstar, *GTA*'s developer. For all its flaws, *San Andreas* doesn't deserve the blame that it gets as a bad influence. First, like *South Park*, *Grand Theft Auto* is a satire and an equal opportunity offender. It would be a mistake to take its intentions too seriously. Second, the game is an homage to gangsta dramas of the '90s. In presenting a picture of urban blight and thug life, it's only being true to the (fictional) source material. The real problem with *San Andreas* is not how it depicts the lead character, but that it's practically the only game with a black lead. Combined with how Rockstar



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— London Times 4.16.05

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depicts that lead, the picture of African-Americans painted by video gaming looks bleak.

In a fascinating September 27th article for the *Washington Post*, Jose Antonio Vargas sheds light when he profiles players of (what else?) *GTA: San Andreas* in the affluent suburb of McLean, VA and in South Central L.A. The rich kids believe the game to be the creation of "a diverse group of guys,

blacks and whites and Latinos," but the less wealthy West Coast kids are more accurate when they credit it to "gringos."

Rockstar North is based in Scotland, a country separated from the American gang experience not only by an ocean, but also by cultural differences and histories. It's not exactly a hotbed of diversity, either: the CIA Factbook places the country's black population at 2%. American studios aren't all that

integrated either, and there's a serious lack of African-American developers. Industry statistics from the International Game Developers Association peg the balance as mostly white (more than 80%), followed by Asian (around 8%), but only about 2% black. It's entirely possible that gaming's virtual whiteness is due to a corresponding real-world phenomenon.

So if most developers are white, but the games they produce draw on stereotypically black music and culture, is there an element of minstrelsy here? Consider *Pulp Fiction*, a movie charged with racial tension and exploration. In the last vignette, director Quentin Tarantino steps in front of the camera to play a white character using extremely sensitive racial language. There's an element of shock to the performance, but it also suddenly highlights what the audience may have forgotten: The frank dialogue batted about by the African-American actors was written by that same Caucasian director. In a way, Tarantino is playing with the attitudes we have toward race and words, and opening himself to questions of its usage. However, in a video game, the white designer and staff have rarely

caused us to question their motivations in the same way, even when their subject matter may cross the same lines or give the impression of "authenticity."

Does a designer have to be black before he can work with hip hop culture? Should he be? Is it "better" if violent games starring African-Americans in stereotyped roles are made by actual African-Americans? Is the white audience engaging in a little metaphorical blackface of their own with these games?

These are questions without clear answers. Clearly, hip hop influenced games sell, and not just to minorities. Upcoming games from artists like Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent are banking on their star power, but also their crossover appeal.

In her speech at the 2005 Game Developer's Conference, Brenda Laurel (VP/Design of now-defunct Purple Moon, which produced games targeting girls) called this focus on the basic tropes of crime, violence and warfare "the Spectacle." In that atmosphere of bread and circuses, it's easier to create unsophisticated stereotypes than nuanced portraits. Perhaps the Spectacle



Instead of attempting an “affirmative action” requirement for developers, the Academy tries to stuff the employment pipeline with a wider range of views.

of mainstream gaming, with its emphasis on creating big-budget, violent set-pieces (and their sequels) without emulating the wider array of situations available to other media, has caused the industry to target only those aspects of hip hop that share a similar viewpoint - guns, gangs and greed.

The Fix

The first solution to the hip hop gap is obvious: If the gaming industry is overwhelmingly White, we need to diversify it. I asked Mario Armstrong, a founder of the Urban Video Game Academy, about his approach. The UVGA is a program that he runs for kids that might not normally see game development as a career path - in other words, those who aren't white males. "I don't have a clue how to break in," the students tell him. As a tech commentator for NPR and Baltimore's Chief Technology Advocate, Armstrong sees diversity (within gender, ethnicity or sexual preference) as the key to making great new games that break out of the Spectacle-driven nature of the industry.

The UVGA, which he started with aagamer.com's Roderick Woodruff and American Intercontinental University

professor Joseph Saulter, works on a threefold path of exposure, education and enhancement to help its students get a leg up. Instead of attempting an “affirmative action” requirement for developers, the Academy tries to stuff the employment pipeline with a wider range of views. When the industry is more diverse, Armstrong says, “whatever they make is going to be a kick-ass game,” and he points to *The Sims* as a balanced development team that made a great product. But he's also aware that the solution needs to be more than just supply-side manipulation; money needs to be spent on more than just bigger and better games. “I'm basically tired of repetition, lack of innovation, the stereotypes and the easy process,” he complains.

So the second solution is encouragement for independent game publishing. Conservative estimates of next-gen console development costs reach \$6 million per game and may exceed \$15 million. Producers don't take risks with that kind of money - and if the current market is any indication, creating a game with a positive black lead is a serious risk; not part of the status quo. Hip hop itself often faces the accusation

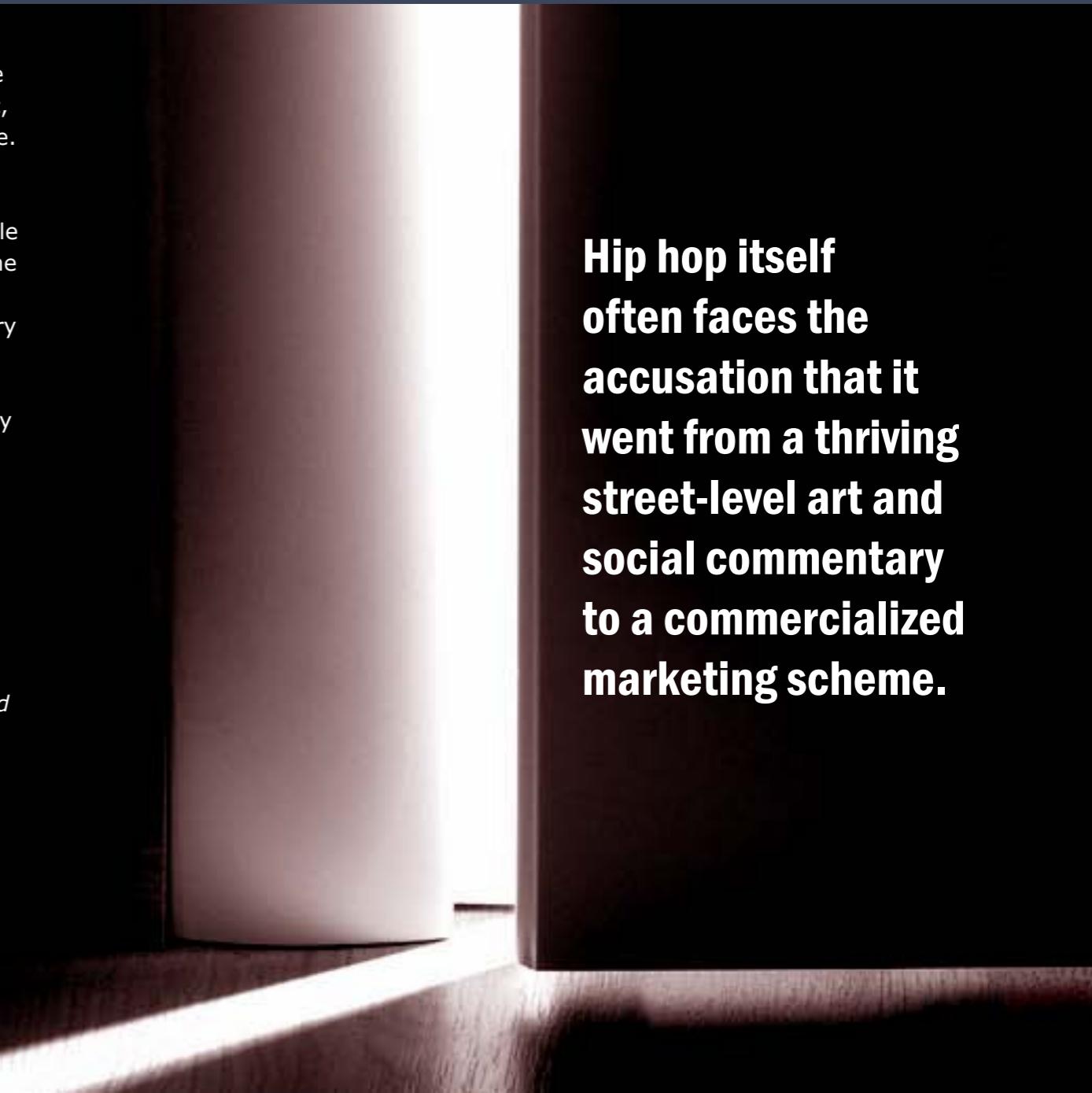
that it went from a thriving street-level art and social commentary to a commercialized marketing scheme. It's ironic that it has joined the games industry, which suffers from much of the same evaluation. The advantage of an independent publishing effort like Greg Costikyan's Manifesto Games is that it lowers the bar for entry, and encourages those that might not have ever thought that games could be a possibility for expression. In much the same way that turntables, beat-boxing, and remixing gave early hip hop a build-it-yourself aesthetic, a market for quirky and low-budget gaming can empower developers from all backgrounds.

At the 2005 National Book Festival, author Walter Dean Myers spoke on why he writes fiction about African-American youth in realistic situations: When he was growing up, he couldn't find himself in the books he read. More and more, today's kids game in addition to reading and television, and they're looking for images of themselves in the same way. If they can't find themselves - or if what they can find is distorted by a warped mirror of hip hop and other American cultures - it helps to perpetuate damages we'd like to think no longer exist. The

technology of gaming has come a long way from when the amount of cartridge space or RAM limited the sprites, music, and other resources available to a game.

A paucity of positive black protagonists in gaming isn't just a dilemma for people with nothing better to do but critique the industry's low diversity. For a growing portion of the audience, it may be a very real part of their self-image and their lives. This lack of acknowledgment is holding shut a door through which many would-be gamers could enter. The industry owes it to itself, and American culture, to make sure it's wide open. ■

Thomas Wilburn is a journalist based in Washington, DC. Previously a political and cultural correspondent for the Washington Asia Press, he currently writes about music, games, culture, and their intersection at www.milezero.org.



Hip hop itself often faces the accusation that it went from a thriving street-level art and social commentary to a commercialized marketing scheme.

MXO: Social Commentary Through Design

by Jonathan Hayter

There are no black Agents.

It's no secret the Matrix Trilogy is an elaborate allegory for many issues that reside in our own System. To that end, the franchise branches that have developed since the film incarnations have sprouted their own versions of that same commentary. While the films and video games have their own inherent entertainment value, this secondary aspect is what makes them more than the sum of their parts and worth more than cursory examination. Though the films were a static delivery for this meme, soon came the massively multiplayer vehicle. Wobbly and poorly constructed it may have been, *The Matrix Online (MXO)* still succeeded – through unique visual design – in one area where all other online games have failed.

It connected massive online gaming to hip hop culture.

I still remember my first time jacking into *MXO*. Loading into one of the main gathering areas made me think I was entering one of those exclusive clubs where only extremely cool, influential people would ever make it past the velvet rope. The kind of place I would never find myself. Gator skin boots, flowing leather trenches, puffy coats, stylish suits, beanies, fedoras, caps, berets, belts, sleek stilettos and bone breaking combat boots whirled around me, all housing avatars of different shapes, sizes and colors. Very interesting. Having just moved on from another MMOG, I was all too used to slaying demons and ghouls alongside my alabaster Nordic brethren. Oh, and in the online game before that as well. And the one before that...

People will create something that mirrors them. As an artist, when I construct a portrait without a model, features from my face inevitably make their way into the sketch. When a 3-D artist at a game studio builds a model for production, his best source of reference material is a

mirror. Racial minorities are infrequently represented in popular video games because most of the people staring into those mirrors don't represent those minorities. This is why *MXO* is unique in the gaming industry. Building upon the vision crafted by the Wachowski brothers, Monolith employed an exceptional design team and focused the art style on a hyper-real version of gritty urban décor and hip hop fashions.

Sadly, the game itself lacked the *je ne sais quoi* to keep me very entertained with playing it, but I soon found myself addicted to the clothes. In an interview with Stratics, Jeff Miller (*MXO*'s Fashion Designer) commented that what stands out to him the most about the fashion in the game is the sheer quantity of outfits. Yeah, me too, Jeff.

Crawling through the city, surrounded on all sides by edifices of concrete and steel, on the run from unbeatable Agents, bleeding and broken from several wounds I find myself unable to ditch my inventory full of clothes in favor of an extra gun or a medpack. I need these beanies; they're different colors! I can't throw away this shirt; it's the only

thing that matches that jacket! I'd run missions only for the unbridled glee of rifling through the wardrobe in some decrepit apartment, looking for cast off garments. Sure, I'd kill the Merovingian's lackeys, but the victory was only sweet if there was a new coat to be found in the deal. Sad, but true.

For awhile I loped about – collecting garments and boots – aimless, but addicted to this outstanding element. Then I met a couple guys in-game. We ran by each other in a sodden alley and paused.

"Hey, Landslide, wanna group?"

"Sure, why not?"

A few days later, I was a member of their guild. Now, I've been a member of a number of guilds in the past, in a wide variety of games. Never have I been in a guild like this. I attribute meeting them to the cultural melting pot represented in *MXO*.

Teamspeak and Ventrilo are old hat to me – there's just no other way to communicate with fellow players

anymore. From past experience, I'm used to the stereotypical straight 'n' narrow vernacular exhibited by the average nerdy, white geek. I neither like nor dislike the nasal-sounding explanations of how to treadmill properly, it's simply the standard fare. In sharp contrast, these guys, mostly from the New York City area, were interesting.

I've never been very hip to the jive, as it were, so comments like, "Yo man, this s**t is tight!" were unusual to me for awhile. As a running joke (to this day), I would enter the Ventrilo server and state in a loud, theatrical voice, "Greetings my brothers, how fare thee on this fine day?"

Funny stuff.

The game appealed to these guys because it represented something extremely familiar to them. They could quickly and easily identify with the setting and style. They played *Star Wars Galaxies* because *Star Wars* is ubiquitous. They played *MXO* because they dug it. It was visually dope, hip, cool, tight and splendidly designed. And although the game itself has faltered on

the tightrope of internet criticism, the fact remains that – unlike most MMOGs – *The Matrix Online* took an important step in connecting with communities who are not usually catered to. My thoughts?

Do it more. 

Jonathan Hayter is the Producer of The Escapist. He likes long walks on the beach and encouraging people to design outside the box. Actually. He hates the beach.

I'd kill the Merovingian's lackeys, but the victory was only sweet if there was a new coat to be found in the deal. Sad, but true.





On The Come Up

by Pat Miller

*Who's that on the M-I-C
Lyrically it's Doctor B
Not Master P, but I'm still OG
Gotta get this paper casually*

I first met Dr. B in a decidedly out-of-place Golfland arcade in sleepy, suburban Castro Valley, CA on a rainy day some four years ago, for a *Capcom vs. SNK 2* tournament he was running. He stands at a lanky six feet or so, which is inconveniently tall for a stand-up arcade cabinet, and in the dim, garish lighting of the arcade, he looks kind of like Dave Chappelle.

The local scene has long since faded from its past weekly tournament glory, and the arcade has fallen from its once competitive heights to be reclaimed by bored high school kids who want to show off their *Dance Dance Revolution* skills, but Dr. B, also known as Brandon Chaney, has refused to follow suit. One moment he is in Pomona, CA for *CVS2* national championships, the next he is coincidentally walking behind me at a Buca di Beppo in downtown San Francisco. Maybe a few months later he's in Oregon. Or finishing art school. Or, in this case, recording tracks with his hip hop crew, Superior Tek.

We bringin hip hop back
Energetically and medically
we patchin s**t up
from the abuse of mediocre n****z
rappin s**t up

Superficially, it would seem that hip hop and videogaming are very different beasts; certainly the predominant media image of the former is black and the latter is white. But our world is ever so much more complex than our crude racial designations will admit, and Eminem's success is by now just as much a fact of life as Vivendi's upcoming *50 Cent: Bulletproof*. But while Snoop Dogg, 50, Def Jam and other prominent hip hop heads have found themselves faithfully exported to the world of PS2, crossovers the other way have not been quite so common. Except for MC Frontalot, who spits his own brand of "nerdcore" rap, authentic representations of gamers in hip hop have been few and far between. Enter Superior Tek, a group of guys named Dr. B, Crescent-X, Oliverian, LAX Tactics, Nef, Brood and Beneficial, who collectively manage to game without being too geeky and rap without being too gangsta.

Spider web, spider sting,
do your job, hey
we reppin' the bay and it's S-T-K
we straight from the west but we
not Kanye

"We grew up playing fighting games," Dr. B tells me. "All our lives playing games like *Street Fighter 2* and *Bloody Roar*. Me and Crescent-X have been best friends since high school, and we always did music, so we just fused that s**t together. We met LAX through another guy we met playing *Capcom vs. SNK 2* at the campus arcade, and he had a friend named Beneficial who made beats." He pauses for a second and continues, "You remember Oliver from Sunnyvale [Golfland]? The guy who was hella good at *CVS2*?" I nod tentatively; I remember seeing the name on a few sets of tournament brackets somewhere, but it's been a while, and I can't attach a face to the name. "Yeah," Dr. B continues, "he's [STK member] Oliverian. He's our ghost producer, kind of like Chad from the Neptunes, just in the background." His excitement - whether about hip hop or about being interviewed - is gradually growing. Without being prompted, he exclaims, "It's our love for music and our bond to





Welcome.

Carlsberg Probably the best beer in the world.

The rap game is just as visceral as a game of Street Fighter

video games and each other keep us motivated to make it to the top! You can quote me on that, just for starters."

*Blast like Goku
I flow so true
Lyrics that go through
you and your crew*

Later, Dr. B mentions that he had just spent a recent weekend in Las Vegas for the Evolution 2005 National Fighting Game Championships. Unlike previous years, where those in the know might only know of Dr. B for his unorthodox tactics, this year brought Superior Tek together, in classic hip hop style, as a promotion team on the sinful streets of Vegas, selling the album to club-goers and competitive gamers alike. "We played at Club Ice, we freestyled with fans in the streets and in the lobby of the MGM Grand...we won Evolution by letting them feel our vibe," he says to me.

This is the new breed of gamers, here; consider Superior Tek as representative of a growing population that is just as comfortable playing *Final Fantasy* or *Madden 2006* and just as comfortable rapping about women and money as

This is the new breed of gamers...

they are about Marvel Comics or *Halo 2*. The rap game is just as visceral as a game of *Street Fighter* to them; they're about sick combinations, whether it's mixing verses and beats or hitting that M. Bison custom combo consistently. They are discriminating gamers, and the industry best take notice not to slap 50 Cent on the cover of a PS2 game and simply expect it to sell like *GTA* does. Just because they do hip hop and fighting games does not mean that they are guaranteed to like *Def Jam Vendetta*. In other words, these guys are living proof that the worlds of hip hop and gaming are becoming ever more relevant to each other in a way that seeing Xboxes on *MTV Cribs* simply cannot convey.

*I dodge Robocops, this ain't OCP
rockin a nice outfit so the hoes see me
these n****z ain't ready best
be-lieve me*

That isn't to say that some people haven't picked up on this. While Electronic Arts may not have the greatest music choices in their games sometimes (please refer to any hockey game ever; maybe that's why people weren't too sad to see them skip a year), they do own their own record label. Next Level Music, a business venture allegedly developed after Universal Pictures approached EA for permission to use the *Medal of Honor* orchestral theme in the *Seabiscuit* movie trailer, is set to turn one year old in a few weeks. For better or for worse one of the American gaming giants is somewhat cognizant of the relationship between gamers and their music.

But what is far more impressive than EA throwing their weight around is the presence of something like Yosumi Records' *Video Game Breaks and Sound Effects Volumes 1 and 2*, which neatly

packages assorted samples. These include old-school *Super Mario Bros.* to not-quite-so-old-school *Shenmue*, with a little bit of everything in between. I don't think I'll be hearing any *Metal Gear Solid* remixes on the radio any time soon, but at least it's **there**.

*Alpha, Beta
Swisher, Sega,
Halo, Madden,
Make it happen*

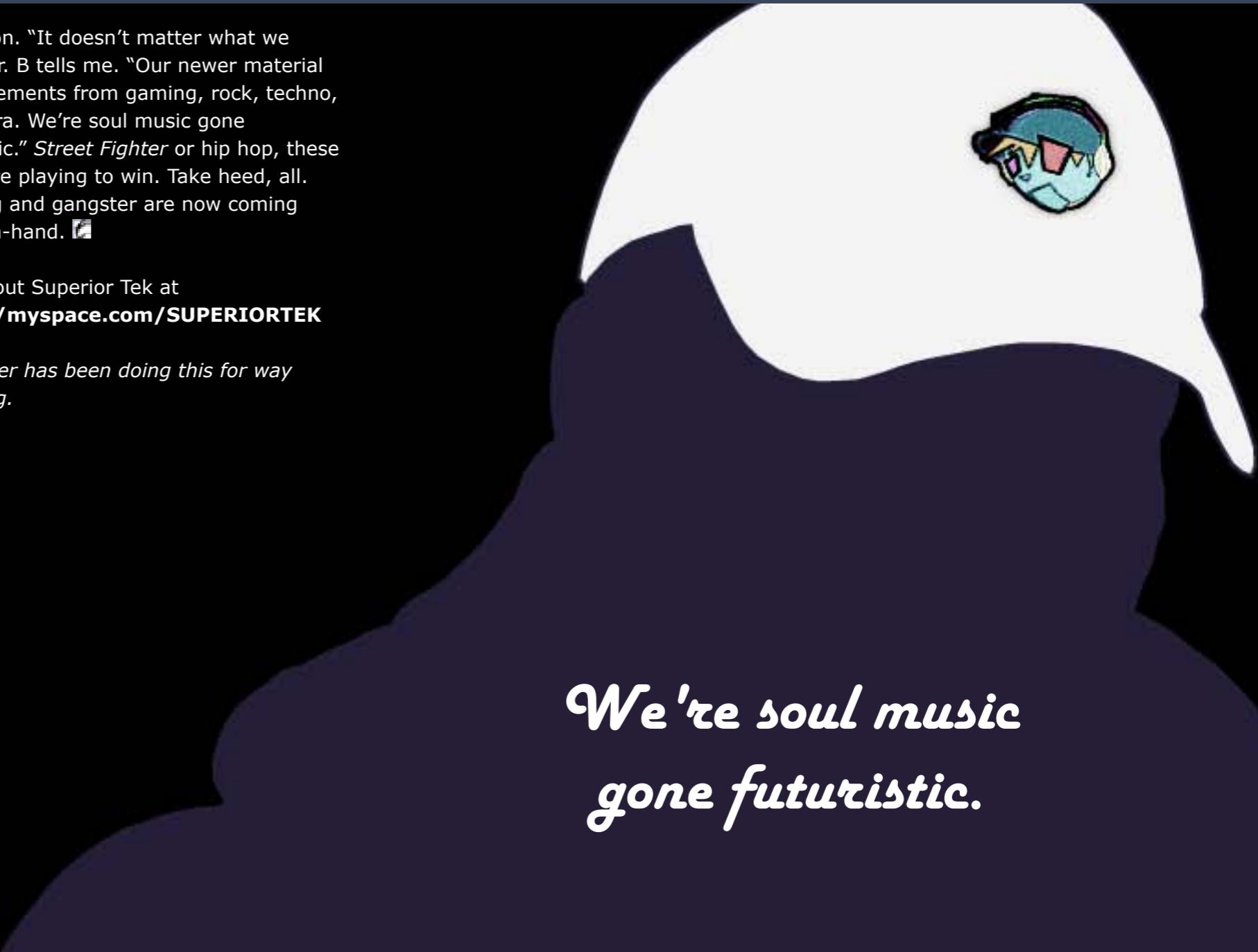
Superior Tek are still relative newcomers to the hip hop scene, and their album belies that fact. Even a casual music listener can tell from a few minutes with their promotional album, *Level Up*, that their beginning tracks feel forced in both production and lyrics. At their best, though, they show a promise in both facets of hip hop music, something that can only be learned by those who are willing to study everyone from Kool Herc to Kanye West.

If *Level Up* is any indication, we can expect that Dr. B and the rest of the Superior Tek crew are taking their rap game into training mode, just like any seasoned fighting gamer, and dissecting their beats and flows with scientific

precision. "It doesn't matter what we use," Dr. B tells me. "Our newer material uses elements from gaming, rock, techno, et cetera. We're soul music gone futuristic." *Street Fighter* or hip hop, these guys are playing to win. Take heed, all. Gaming and gangster are now coming hand-in-hand. ■

Check out Superior Tek at
<http://myspace.com/SUPERIORTek>

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.



**We're soul music
gone futuristic.**

Doing It Better

by Whitney Butts

Hip hop does **it** better. We're not talking perfection here, but **it's** good. **It** isn't making music or clothing. **It** also isn't about generating world peace. What **it** is, is making videogames which trendsetters endorse and play.

Yesterday's gaming generation is growing up. Those that played with Atari and Nintendo in the '80s and '90s are hitting their second and third decades of life. They grew up playing games and know the gaming culture. Today's hip hop artists are among the few from this generation able to bridge the gap between relating an experience and truly making it interactive.

This is not the first time someone attempted to close the gap between gaming and music. The last 20 years have produced some games-turned-pop-culture hits and others that shouldn't have even made it across the concept boards, but hip hop wasn't the only genre trying to gain a foothold in gaming. The '90s yielded numerous meager attempts, spanning all genres of music.

Take the 1990 multi-platform game, *Michael Jackson's Moonwalker*. Premise: Run around dancing, which somehow saves children from kidnappers. *Moonwalker* was one of the earliest movie-game tie-ins, and while it was arguably the better half of the package, it wasn't something to brag about owning.

Rock made its first attempt with *Journey*. The band, Journey, produced a series of games in the early '80s where you ran around as them, fending off fans and other horrific encounters while listening to "exciting" midi versions of Journey songs. "Don't Stop Believing" that this wasn't the greatest commercial success of all time.

1992 marked the entrance of *Kriss Kross: Make My Video*, on the Sega CD. It was just a weak attempt at what could be that elusive musical/game culture bridge. You'd create your own music videos to Kriss Kross songs, but it was only as interactive as messing around with action figures while the radio was on. *Rap Jam Volume 1* was born in 1995, starring LL Cool J, Public Enemy and Queen Latifah shooting hoops. The problem here was that shooting the SNES game cartridge through a hoop was more fun than playing the game.

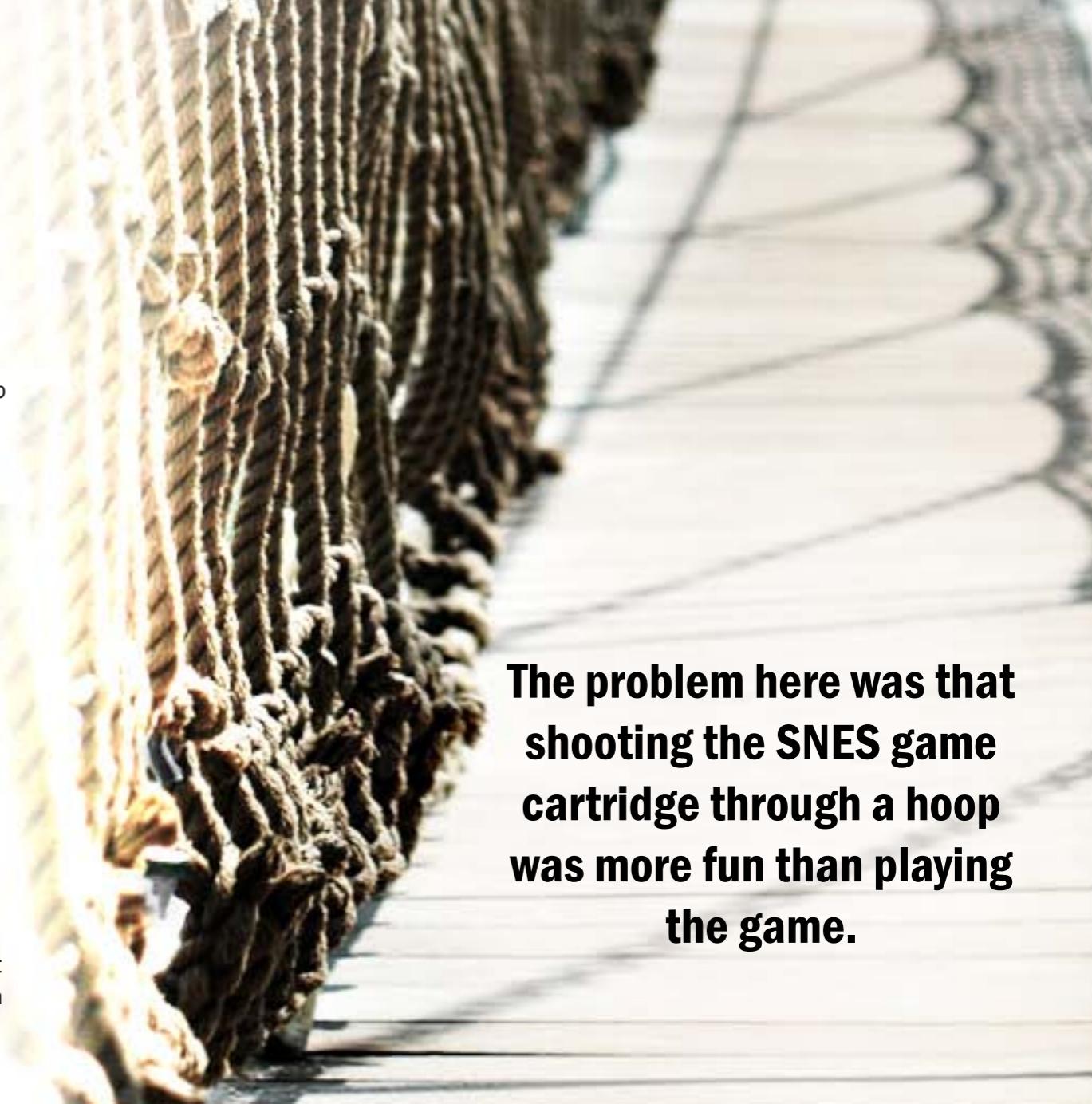
KISS created *KISS Psycho Circus*. Ozzy tried his hand with Ozzy Osbourne's *Black Skies*. Neither of which was widely received nor taken seriously. *KISS Psycho Circus* was an extremely poor attempt at an action game, and *Black Skies* was cancelled before it broke from

the gates. Rock artists couldn't sell games, either, and probably should have shied away from striking into the digital world without better design documents in hand.

These early attempts at crossover bridges were barely capable of withstanding their own weight. They were built from twigs, and collapsed under the stress of real scrutiny. Eventually, both the rock and the hip hop genre were beginning to realize gamers wouldn't gobble up weird attempts at marketing bombs.

Enter the hip hop artist-gamers. An article in the Boston Globe says, "The hip hop community develops products differently." The hip hop artist community has a tendency to be a large scale trend setter. They look at what they like, and call it cool. Their fans are cool by proxy when they duplicate the artists; a trend is born.

Wu-Tang Clan started everything in 1999, with *Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style*, which received moderate praise and reviews. The general consensus was that the game needed a better engine to be a better game. The real revolution



The problem here was that shooting the SNES game cartridge through a hoop was more fun than playing the game.

occurred with the help of epic record label Def Jam.

Backed by hip hop artists such as DMX and LL Cool J, they produced *Def Jam: Fight for NY* in 2004 and *Def Jam Vendetta* this past year. Both received good reviews, and actually boasted some replay value.

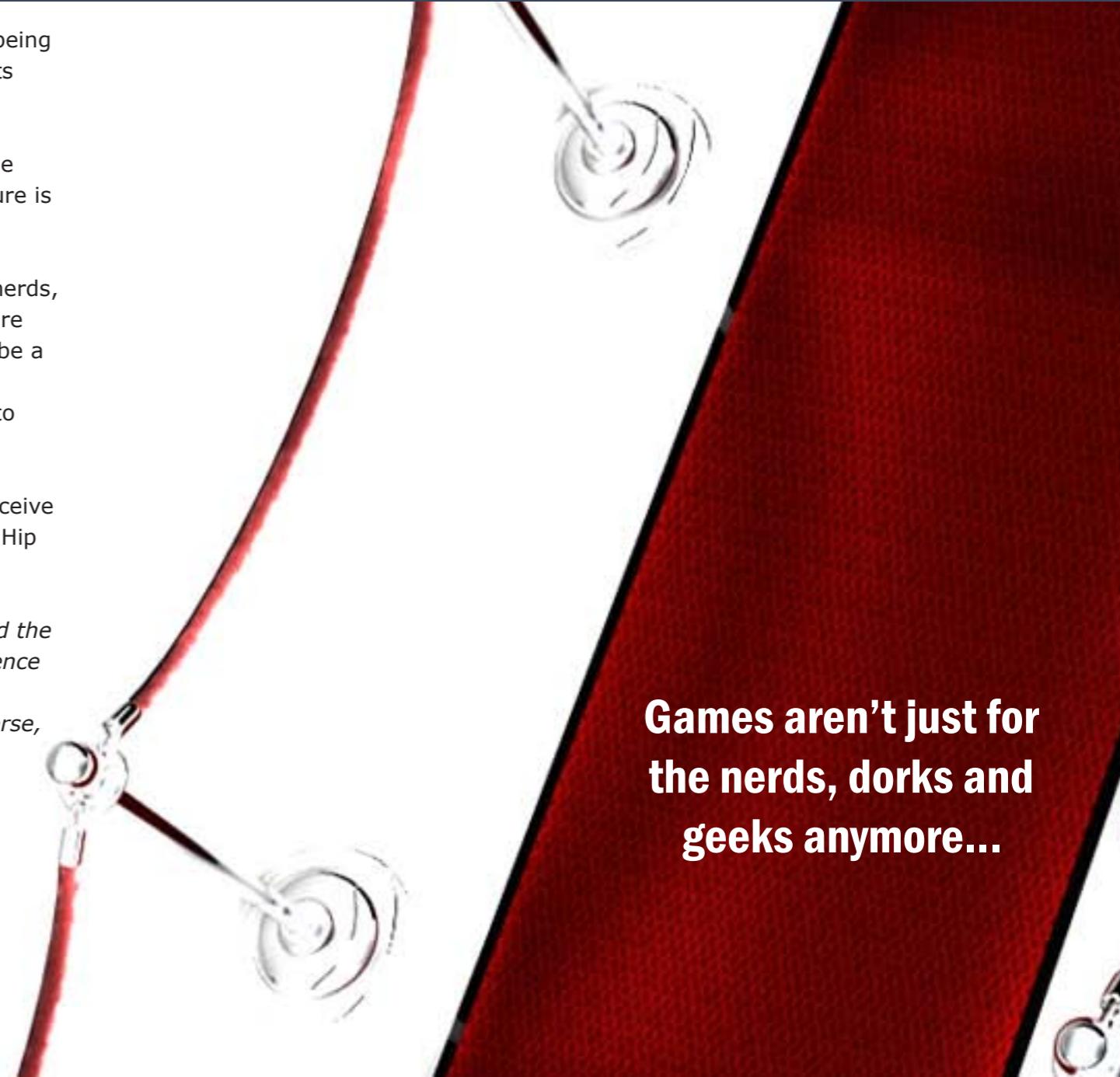
With Def Jam providing the foundation, 50 Cent stepped up and continued the video game trend in hip hop. In *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, due to release in November 2005, 50 Cent plays a hustler who gets into trouble on the streets of New York. *Bulletproof* isn't the true story of 50 Cent; it will be another underground story set in New York. One has to wonder if there's much room in the inn, after *Grand Theft Auto* and *Need for Speed: Underground*.

While some hip hop artists are designing games, it has also become quite commonplace for celebrities to star in games as well. This is just another way of permanently bridging together these two types of entertainment. Snoop Dogg will be starring in next year's *Fear and Respect*. Talib Kweli plays the main character in *Marc Ecko's Getting Up*:

Contents Under Pressure, which is being well received by gaming press, as its launch nears in November.

What does this spell for classic game culture? It's still there, but the culture is broadening. People who wouldn't normally play games are becoming gamers. Games aren't just for the nerds, dorks and geeks anymore, games are trendy and hip. Celebrities want to be a part of them, and fans get the opportunity to become a bit closer to their favorite musicians, actors and actresses, finally closing the gap between the entertainment you perceive and the entertainment you control. Hip hop did it better. 

Whitney Butts is the "woman behind the curtain" at *The Escapist*. Her existence revolves around the fact that *Mathematics is the key to the universe, and that she alone is the square root of all evil*.



Games aren't just for the nerds, dorks and geeks anymore...

NEWS BITS

Activision-Spark Update:

Activision Countersues

You might remember Spark Unlimited suing Activision for fraud earlier this month. In the spirit of American torts, Activision has countersued Spark for breach of contract and fraud. Activision is claiming Spark's CEO, Craig Allen, pitched Activision in order to become their WWII game development firm.

The wording of the suit is particularly nasty, saying some "misrepresentations were intended to deceive Activision into believing that Spark possessed the talent, knowledge, skill, and experience necessary to create a similarly successful new WWII video game franchise that could rival Medal of Honor."

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!
available NOW!

World of Warcraft Player Analyzes Anti-Cheating Initiative

A World of Warcraft player was able to discern the software Blizzard uses to detect potential cheaters in the online game. The program, which automatically downloads every time the game is booted up, loads into a user's RAM and searches running programs for popular phrases that appear in numerous cheating utilities. According to the author of the original article, this type of method is commonly used in spyware programs to obtain information from unsuspecting users.

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The New Mainstream

How Hip Hop and Geek Culture Are Revolutionizing America's Pop Culture

by Max Steele

OK. Here's the deal.

If you're middle class, you're not cool. Granted, a lot of people in the middle class **don't care** if they're cool. They have nice, safe nine to five jobs, they watch prime time TV, they own hybrid cars, and they are reasonably content. But they have to put up with coffee-drinking, beret-wearing hipsters sneering at them, and it's not because they control the means of production. It's because they aren't cool.

There's one group of bourgeois that desperately **wants** to be cool, though, and that's the young people, the teenagers. Since they can't look to Mom and Dad for their lessons in cool (God forbid!), where do they find their role models?



They look to the Street - to the raw edge of urban black culture. Our entertainment and fashion industries deliver it to them in the sanitized lifestyle mix we call hip hop. Nelson George, author of *Hip Hop America* notes, "We know rap music and hip hop have broken from their ghetto roots to assert a lasting influence on American clothing, magazine publishing, television, language, sexuality and social policy." As a result, black youth culture is now the mainstream for middle-class, white youth.

If imitation is a form of flattery, the flattery is only going one way. Those who are authentically Street don't aspire to be middle class. No, the Street aspires to be upper class. J-Z. Diddy. J-Lo. And when they can, they zealously adopt every available trapping of wealth and status: Cristal and Courvoisier in the wet bar, DG and Versace in the closet, Cadillac Escalade in the driveway, a 60" plasma screen with an Xbox 360 in the crib.

Did that last one throw you? I thought you knew. Games are the new Gucci. Rappers and movie stars aspire to be game developers. It's all messed up.

Games are the new Gucci.

How did this happen?

Fundamentally, you have to blame Mark Andreessen of Netscape. In the world we all used to live in, Mark Andreessen would have lived a comfortable, safe, boring life, as a moderately well-paid computer programmer, or maybe a NASA rocket scientist, or something. Instead, he went and founded Netscape and made himself a multimillionaire. I can only assume he drove a Ferrari and dated a supermodel and drank Cristal while he was at it. Netscape inspired an entire generation of other nerdy people who might have gone onto safe, boring lives as rocket scientists to figure out ways to get rich instead.

The 1990s Dot Com Boom, in other words, ushered in an unprecedented era of wealth creation among young, technologically-savvy knowledge workers. Before Netscape, people who wanted to be wealthy thought about careers like lawyer, banker or doctor, or for the glamour-conscious, model, star



or athlete. After Netscape, people who wanted to be rich had careers like "online pet food delivery platform developer."

This rise of geek culture has been debated on Google, discussed on blogs and even has its own book. But let's be clear. Being a geek isn't cool in the sense that, say, Usher is cool. It's cool in the sense that being a doctor is cool. It's got status. It offers wealth and thereby the opportunity to purchase prestige.

Now, bankers, lawyers and similar boring, rich people like to spend their wealth on things like yachts, golf and

Corinthian leather briefcases. "Subtle" has long been the watchword of the upper crust. But fabulously successful geeks really don't give a damn about golf, yachts or briefcases of any type of leather. They aren't particularly subtle. Nor do they know the difference between Merino Wool and Cashmere. They **do** know that 80" plasma screens are really fricking awesome.

Because of the long and glorious history of geek and gamer unity, it's a safe bet that anyone who is an online pet food delivery platform developer plays video games. Many of them probably consider video games their favorite form of

entertainment (perhaps a close second to Kevin Smith movies).

So what that means is that some of the wealthiest people in our society like to spend lavishly on games and tech. And that, in turn, means that games and tech have become aspirational goods on the Street.

Which leads to the current bizarre case: Games are now cool because middle class teenagers are emulating hip hop moguls who are adopting the trappings of wealth which are defined by Silicon Valley millionaires who like games and tech.

Watch any episode of MTV Cribs, and I guarantee that the mansion of every hip hop star and pro athlete has a big-screen TV and a top-of-the-line gaming system with loads of DVDs and games. Tune into any episode of Pimp My Ride and check out how many of the cars get "pimped" with gaming rigs in the trunk or the backseat. Buy the new Atari game by Mark Ecko and enjoy the soundtrack by Diddy. Ask yourself whether Marc Ecko and Diddy are getting involved in games purely for financial reasons, or because they think it's cool.

What does it all mean? It means game over for the traditional Mainstream cool



There's a New Mainstream for America and it fuses hip hop and geek culture.

of rock, sports and beers. There's a New Mainstream for America and it fuses hip hop and geek culture. Its music and fashion combined with games and tech. It's aspirational and it's extravagant and it's techno-elite.

The New Mainstream is why technology is now a luxury good and style suddenly matters. It's why Microsoft's Xbox 360 looks like it was designed by Apple, and Nintendo's Gameboy Micro looks like it was designed by Nokia. It's why, today, it's cool to own an Alienware computer with a stylized case and building your own PC from parts just means you're broke. It's why the Motorola Razr was such a huge success. It's why you can expect Rockstar to release its own line of

hip hop lifestyle clothing one of these days.

In the meantime, go buy a flatscreen HDTV and watch anime – subtitled, not dubbed. Download mash-ups on Kazaa and use them as the soundtrack on your Halo 2 machinima. Use your Xbox Music Mixer to DJ house parties. Look at porn on your PSP. Invite your buddies over to drink Baccardi and play *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.

Be cool. 

Max Steele is an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. When not actively being mysterious, he passes his time manipulating time and space to fit his plans for world domination.

Bustin' A Groove With PaRappa

by Joe Blancato

I was thirteen when Notorious B.I.G. died, in 1997. I was playing a game of nine-ball with my friend. We were watching MTV. "King Nothing" by Metallica was playing when they broke in with the news. I had no idea who the man was, just that he was a rapper who got shot. Like that Tupac guy that was gunned down on the Las Vegas strip the year before. I asked my friend, who was a bit more into the hip hop scene, who he was. "He was a pretty good rapper," was all he had for me.

A couple months later, my friend and I would disavow that short conversation ever happened. Even hinting we weren't Biggie fans from the very beginning was social suicide. Before he died, rap was already cruising along, a star rising after Tupac's death. After Biggie, MTV and the music industry marketed the emerging craze into a lifestyle supernova. Puff Daddy was everywhere, even in my white, suburban home. By the MTV Video Awards later that year, every teenager in America was hooked on hip hop and rap. Tossing posthumous accolades Biggie's way during the awards was just icing on a very well planned marketing cake. The concept of the "rocker" was dead, and Biggie's "gangsta" memory killed it.

It certainly wasn't coincidence when my friends in the courtyard started talking about an esoteric rapping game Sony just released. Entitled *PaRappa the Rapper*, you milled about a cel-shaded town as a street-talking dog who visited his animal buddies and freestyled with them. In order to rap with *PaRappa*'s friends, you'd mash buttons in time to their "flow," with the musical journey spanning numerous beat timings and styles. Rather than following the violent gangsta rap paradigm, *PaRappa* rapped an encouraging story of self confidence and self reliance, all the while demanding extremely good rhythm.



If anything, *PaRappa the Rapper* was gateway hip hop. The concept of letting a teenage kid wrap his digits around an album written by a former crack dealer in New York City was a foreign one to a lot of parents. But a dog singing songs to alligators was just so... Disney. How dangerous could rap be if it was delivered by a puppy in a cute hat?

And so flowed *PaRappa*. The little guy was my buddies' key to cool, and the neighborhood copy roamed from house to house as we all sang along to catchy tunes rooted in a culture we were stealing from impoverished urbanites 2,500 miles away. The success of the first title not only made way for a sequel, it established the rhythm game genre and paved the way for games like *Dance Dance Revolution*.

But *DDR* isn't without other roots. *Bust a Groove* found its way into the same circle of friends who introduced me to *PaRappa*. It was a year later, but our interest in the hip hop genre hadn't lost any of its teenage intensity, and we enthusiastically ran to the Blockbuster a mile away to rent a communal copy of the game.

Rather than tapping buttons in syllabic timing, like *PaRappa*, *Bust a Groove* was based on the beat of the music. Avatars would assume different dance styles as players would tap a button combination in time with the music. Not strictly fast-paced hip hop, the game introduced my friends and me to house music. The tracks we liked, we'd crank throughout the house as two of us engaged in a dance battle would be shouting out the music's time signature. **One, two, three, four, X-Circle-Square, two, three, four.** As a dancer's momentum built up, he'd progressively dance better, flashing more elaborate moves. The break dancers would start spinning on their heads. The rave girl would ... do whatever the hell it is rave girls do at raves. My parents would gather around the TV with us when we started getting really fired up, intrigued by this strange game that spurred us to more outbursts than *Street Fighter II*, yet didn't involve spilling gallons of blood on the floor.

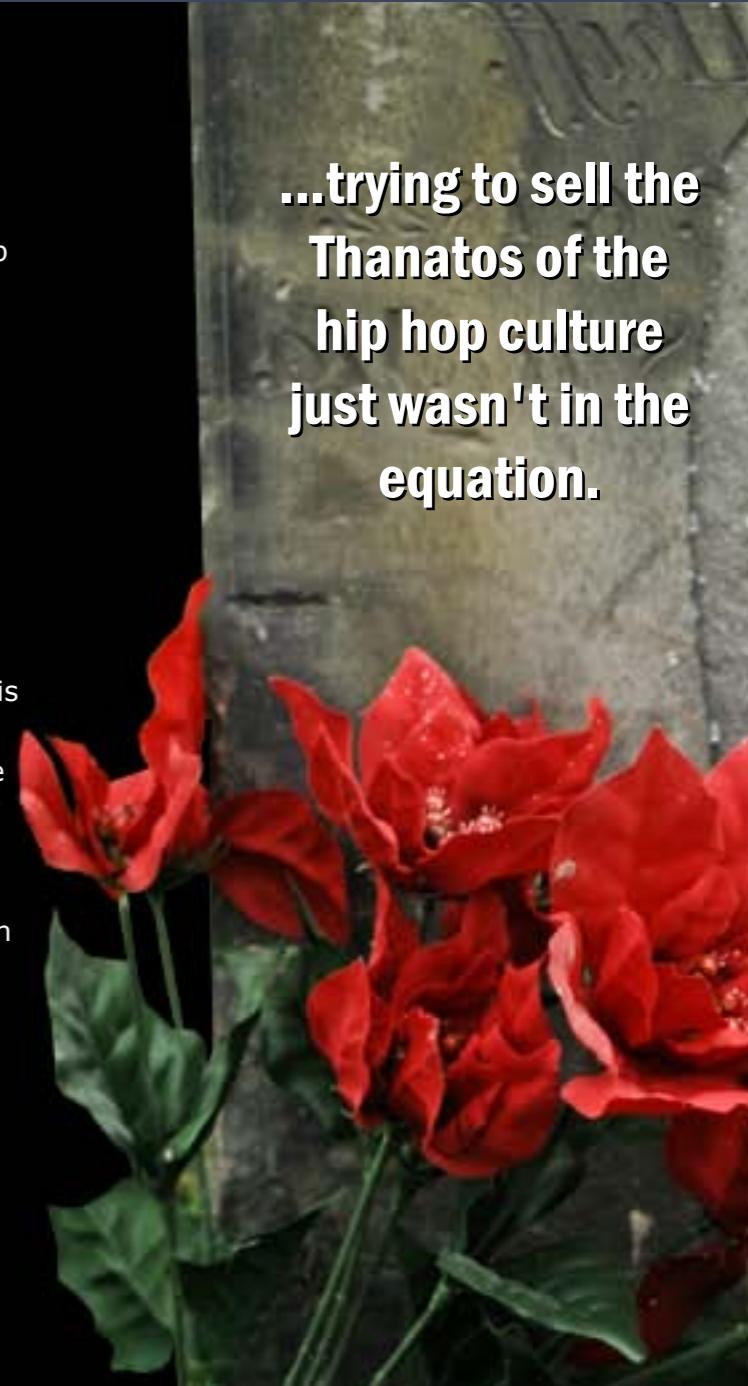
Imagine that. Games based on hip hop culture that don't preach - or even make reference to - violence. When *Bust a Groove* and *PaRappa the Rapper* made their steps toward the mainstream, trying to sell the Thanatos of the hip hop

culture just wasn't in the equation. Rap and hip hop started as a positive outlet for underprivileged kids in big cities to express their angst, a concept any teenager can get his head around, no matter the subject matter. Sure, hip hop and its culture takes a lot of suburban kids out of their element, but it also gives them another outlet to cope with growing up.

Biggie's death, no matter how tragic for his family, wasn't in vain in the grand karmic scheme. The sad event pushed hip hop and rap into the headlines, opening a whole new world of opportunity for the genre to grow. In this way, he helped bring some joy to a group of friends huddled around a game he never had anything to do with. His influence has inspired an entire generation in a way few icons can. That alone guarantees his eternal life, deep in the minds of anyone connected to his music. ■

Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of waterthread.org.

...trying to sell the Thanatos of the hip hop culture just wasn't in the equation.



MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

“What would be some of the lyrics from a rap/hip-hop song written about your favorite videogame?”

Max Steele, “The New Mainstream”

Seeing as I'm all about the upcoming City of Villains I'm going to go with the best lyric ever: “I've got the Power!” by SNAP.

Whitney Butts, “Doing It Better”, Lead Web Developer

I can't sing, let alone rap. So this is a bit beyond me, but I'd guarantee that it would have something to do with Half-Life. It would be the Head Crab Rap and every now and then some really loud noise would stick out and scare you.

Pat Miller, “On the Come Up”

Del The Funkee Homo-sapien raps in “Proto Culture”:

*To anyone who knew me better
Know I chose Saturn first Cause it's 2-D
heaven
Bernie Stolar dropped the ball with the
RAM cartridge
X-men Vs. Streetfighter could've
expanded the market*

It's like he's telling the story of my life.

Thomas Wilburn, “Guns, Gangs, and Greed”

Jet Grind Radio

*Wake mom up, hum the baseline,
improvise?*

*To survive you gotta grind, put the GGs
on the rise Got jet set style on my heels
like the Man Got inspiration in a can, no
plan, but - damn!*

*Who I am? Know what I say? Just let the
radio play.*

For a game with such a great soundtrack, I doubt I'm really doing it any credit here. Oh well.

Jon Hayter, “MXO: Social Commentary Through Design”, Escapist Producer

Excerpt from A Sims Life:

*Murminbagircrasah!
Deh mamresumra-hah?
Hayd! Sern furmimbra
Fonim-ba
Turdimb-ra
Onay bur murimha!*

Joe Blancato, “Bustin’ a Groove with PaRappa”, Contributing Editor

*Rippin' arms, gummin' heads
Just because some Eisenhower goon
built a city on my bed.*

From Stubbs the Zombie. Not my favorite all time, but my favorite du jour.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

*X-Crunk!
X-Com! What? X-Com! Yeaaah!
Searchin' for the aliens, that are killin'
homo-sapiens
Turn based strategy, research
technology
Fly to the moon base, save all the
human race
What? Yeah!*

